

## **GESTALT APPROACH TO ORGANISATIONAL CONSULTING**

### ***Context***

I started my career in consultancy immediately after completing my MBA. Like many of my contemporaries, I thought consultancy offered an obvious opportunity to apply my newly gained knowledge. It seemed unlikely that many companies would give me, someone who had spent 10 years in sales and marketing, a highly paid job in their finance department, or any other function of which I had no direct experience, and yet that was the hope of many people taking their MBA's, that they would be able to jump the functional barrier. Consultancy offered the best possibility, but even then, the best offer I was able to get was in a specialist marketing consultancy.

The prevailing consultancy paradigm at that time, and it probably still is to a large extent, was based on the assumption that the consultant would have greater knowledge or skills in a particular functional or technical domain than the organisation. The methodology of this paradigm is a linear-analytic one in which the consultant diagnoses the problem, and writes a report with recommended solutions, although these days he/she would be likely to get involved with the process of implementation.

This approach is fine where the assumption is justified, but far too often it is not, and the consultant has to engage in some skilful promotional and selling activity in order to promote an essentially spurious claim to expertise over and above the client's. Clients often collude with this at one level, because they would like a 'solution' to a 'problem' which they feel they have identified.

The client's collusion is based on a second shared assumption, that organisations work in a linear fashion, in which cause-effect relationships can be objectively ascertained, and hence problems correctly identified. There is much to suggest, from both recent and current research, that this view of organisations is extremely limited in its ability to handle the complex phenomena which managers and consultants are experiencing in their attempts to improve organisational effectiveness. Sticking with the old paradigm serves merely to sustain the myth of certainty and predictability in an essentially chaotic world.

The Gestalt approach on the other hand has field theory as its central premise, a way of thinking in which the total situation is appreciated as a whole, and there is acknowledgement of "the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of the whole" (Lewin 1952). Taking this view, all events and phenomena only have meaning in their context, which seems to me to be a particularly helpful way of conceptualising organisations, and a useful starting point for thinking about a consultancy intervention. It also places emphasis on fully experiencing the 'here and now', the notion that by going fully into the experience of the present, the possibilities for action come clearly into focus. This emergent way of working seems a more appropriate way of engaging with complexity and uncertainty than attempting to predict and plan for it.

### ***Theoretical Overview***

The assumption which underlies a Gestalt approach to organisational change, is that change is a naturally occurring phenomenon which we cannot control. What we can do is enhance the organisation's capability to respond to its changing internal and external environment, to release its capacity to experiment and to initiate. For most managers who are trained to set objectives, and construct milestones to reach them, the idea that change cannot be 'managed' in the same way comes hard.

Furthermore there is an obvious implication that change is inherently unpredictable, and therefore attempts to 'plan change' in the way managers, brought up in the conventions of 'scientific management' assume they should, are futile. Stacey (1993) argues that elaborate planning procedures are merely a defence against anxiety, 'a denial of uncertainty itself'.

A further assumption of the Gestalt approach is that human beings and organisations have an inherent capacity to creatively adjust to their environment. This capacity to stay in healthy relation to one's changing environment is referred to in Gestalt terminology as 'self-regulation'.

This natural capacity for self-regulation is liable to be interrupted by environmental interferences, events and experiences which are neither bad nor good in themselves, but whose cumulative impact induces a fixed rather than a

flexible and creative response. Hence any impairment of the capacity for self-regulation broadly defines the problem area in a Gestalt intervention.

The main purpose of a Gestalt intervention is to increase awareness of the field and the client's relationship with it, through paying attention to and emphasising the processes and interactions taking place in the present. This focus is predicated on the 'paradoxical theory of change' (Beisser, 1970), whereby "change occurs when a person becomes what he or she is, not when he or she tries to become what (s)he is not".

The act of fully exploring and experiencing phenomena as they presently are, will lead to spontaneous self-organisation. This is the Gestalt theory of change, which is contrary to most prevailing theories of organisational change. It does not depend on evangelism, visions of the future, re-engineering or top down cascades, but on a fundamental view that human beings and the organisations they construct, have an inherent capacity to creatively regulate and organise themselves in response to their changing environment, if that capacity is nurtured and sometimes released. Leaving the final word with Beisser, "change does not take place through a coercive attempt by the individual, or by another person to change him, but it does take place if one takes the time and effort to be what one is - to be fully invested in one's current position".

### ***Foundations of Gestalt Theory***

The essential underpinnings of the Gestalt Theory of Change, are drawn broadly from the fields of Science, Gestalt Psychology, and Philosophy. Clarkson (1989) explains that 'in Gestalt, the whole is always greater than the part and any part refers to the whole-----Most core Gestalt concepts overlap'. It is rooted in Existential Philosophy, it is explicit in Complexity theory, and is predicated on the Gestalt psychologists theory that it is characteristic of human perceptual processes to create meaning by the perception of wholes and the need for closure.

Clarkson suggests a clustering of three theoretical concepts, Holism (organismic wholeness), Change (cyclic flux) and Process (dynamic interrelatedness). Yontef (1980) uses three principles to define Gestalt as a therapy which seem to be particularly helpful in understanding the role of the practitioner.

*Principle one:* Gestalt therapy is phenomenological; its only goal is 'awareness' and its methodology is the methodology of awareness (the Change principle).

*Principle two:* Gestalt therapy is based wholly on dialogic existentialism, i.e. the I-Thou contact/withdrawal process (the Process principle).

*Principle three:* Gestalt therapy's conceptual foundation or world view is based on holism and field theory (the Holism principle)

Furthermore, any of the three properly and fully understood encompasses the other two. I now intend to elaborate briefly on each of these three principles, and in doing so it is interesting to notice the overlap between them - their essential indivisibility.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology has been interpreted as the method of faithful description of phenomena in order to get "to the things themselves". It places description first in the process of investigation, before experimental or other forms of data reduction take place. To be critical of one's own assumptions is a prerequisite of unbiased description, and in that respect it is a critical science. Husserl (1970) warned the investigator 'not to hunt deductively after constructions unrelated to the matter in question.....but to grant its right to whatever is clearly seen'.

As the science of meaning Phenomenology holds that every experience of reality is an experience of unities of meaning. This derives from the concept of intentionality which is central to Phenomenology. Intentionality means that any human experience or action has an object which is conceptually distinct from that experience or action, and may or may not exist independently. That which I see over there, the pain which I feel within, the theory which I hold to be true, are all objects of my present acts of seeing, feeling, believing and as such they are said to be "intended" by these mental acts. They are intentional correlates in contrast to the Newtonian notion of objective reality in which subject is separated from object, and reality is chopped up into supposedly scientific manageable proportions.

Phenomenology is the methodology of Existential philosophy, which is not a doctrine but a style of philosophy in which the subject holds the truth, not the object, in which the subject is the existent in the whole range of his existing, and which tries to express the whole spectrum of existence known directly and concretely in the very act of existence. Phenomenology is the tool by which the existentialist explores her passionate, subjective experience, by which she becomes aware of her presuppositions, prejudices, her interpretational process.

The phenomenological exploration, on the one hand focuses on, and gives prime value to, the unique and unshareable differences in every person's experience of their world. Unshareable in the sense that one person can never fully know the experience of another, or at least they can never be certain whether they know or not, and the assumption is that each complex interaction between a changing person and their changing environment will necessarily be unique. On the other hand, the essence of a person's experience may well correspond in many cases with that of others, and so the troublesome notion of 'reality', expressed in the Descartes/Newtonian paradigm as a concern for objective, robustly logical/analytical definition, is transformed into a process of subjective, consensual validation.

While psychology traditionally focuses on the individual, phenomenological psychology is situation-centred. The primary emphasis is on the person-world relationship. No analysis of behaviour is complete without an adequate description of the place in which, and with respect to which behaviour "takes place".

### **Field theory**

Field theory is particularly relevant for those of us who are interested in organisational change. Kurt Lewin (1952), who originally introduced the idea into social systems thinking, said that Field theory is not a theory in the usual sense, but a way of "looking at the total situation" rather than looking at it piecemeal. There is acknowledgement of "the organised, interconnected, interdependent, interactive nature of complex human phenomena"; the theory emphasises the "interconnectedness between events and the settings or situations in which these events take place", and describes how human actions and experience are a function of the organisation of the field as a whole. With a field theory outlook we abandon looking for single causes, and we also abandon viewing phenomena in terms of cause and effect thinking. Lewin drew upon Maxwellian field theory in physics in which the fundamental "unit" is no longer a particle or a mass, but a field of force. Within a field, there is a constantly changing distribution of forces affecting things in the field. Events are determined by the nature of the field as a whole, which is constantly in flux.

This concept of 'field' however, while having a scientific basis in Physics, can only be viewed as a useful metaphor when applied to social systems, and Gestalt practitioners have always had some difficulty in explicating it as a proper 'theory' of organisation, hence Lewin's reservation that it is not a theory in the usual sense, rather a way of 'perceiving'. What is more, it is a way of perceiving that tends to have more currency with intuitive, than with rational-analytic modes of thinking which have tended to predominate in organisations. Fortunately for Gestalt practitioners, with the growing awareness of the inherent complexity in organisations, the ideas contained within field theory now have more face-validity, and the emerging theory of Complexity itself seems likely to provide a more robust theoretical foundation for a field view of organisations (see below).

### ***The Gestalt Model of Intervention***

#### **1 Presence**

The notion of presence is core to a Gestalt model of intervention. By this I mean the way in which the interventionist is in the organisation. (S)he essentially joins the organisation, becoming part of the field; (s)he does not attempt instrumentally to 'do something to' the organisation, but rather to have an impact in the field through the quality of his or her presence. The interventionist provides a presence which may otherwise be lacking or discouraged in the system. Specifically this means:

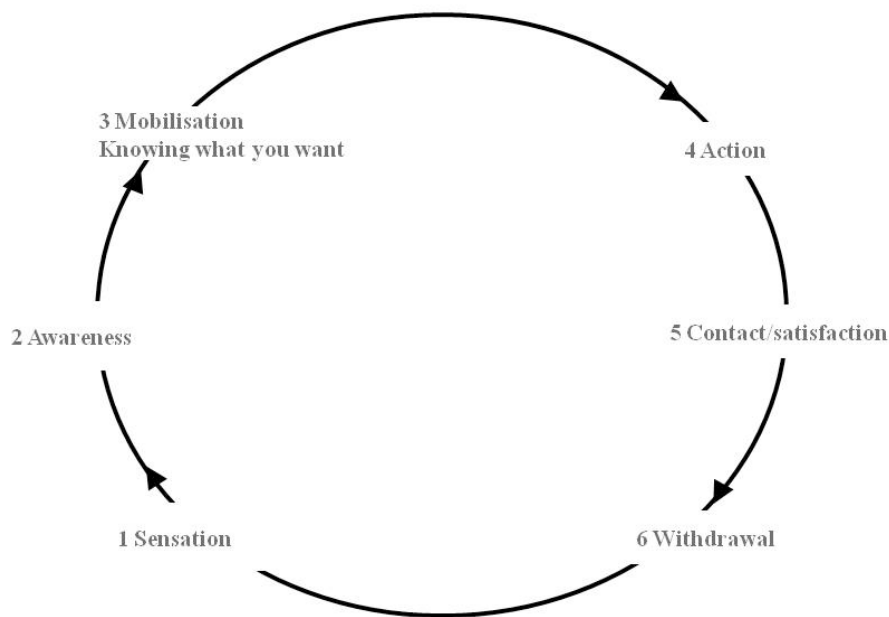
- A Being authentically present in such a way that encourages others to be fully who they are
- B Modelling a way of solving problems which pays attention to the emergent, self-organising properties of the field
- C Helps to focus client energy on the reality of things as they are, rather than as they would like to believe they are, through a process of deep dialogic exploration
- D Facilitates dialogue across rigid boundaries, in such a way as to permanently loosen those boundaries

## 2 Consultant as Teacher

The consultant teaches the client system those skills necessary for functioning better in carrying out the functions of awareness, mobilisation, action and contact

These functions form part of the Gestalt cycle of experience, which is one of the cornerstones of the Gestalt model. It describes the process by which people, individually or collectively, become aware of what is going on at any moment, and how they mobilise energy to take some action which allows them to deal constructively with the possibilities suggested by the new awareness.

### The Gestalt Cycle



### 'Resistance to Change'

As with individuals, organisations are maintained by a system of beliefs, about how to survive, how to relate to their environment. Indeed we might argue that the essence of an organisation is the system of beliefs and perceptions that constitute it. The balance sheet may be what defines it for an accountant, but for those who work in it, it is a phenomenon, part shared and part personal. The shared beliefs are what is often described as 'the glue'. Edgar Shein (1985) talks about 'basic assumptions' as the roots of organisation culture, which inform all transactions both internally and externally and give rise to stable patterns and routines. While stable patterns and routines are both useful and necessary for effective organisational functioning, when they become fixed, they inhibit its capacity for adjustment and renewal. The basic assumptions began as conscious choices which led to success, so that these stable patterns and routines are therefore embedded in powerful, historically validated assumptions, which often lead to valiant efforts to defend and maintain them.

They also provide a certain cohesiveness and meaning to members of an organisation, so attempts to change them give rise, not unnaturally to what is often labelled as 'resistance'.

However, as Nevis (1987) points out 'it is a label applied by those who see themselves as agents of change, and is not necessarily the phenomenological experience of the targets....most of the attempts to understand resistance are made from the perspective or bias of those seeking to bring about change'. From their point of view the most common reasons are likely to be:

- A desire not to give up something of value
- A misunderstanding of the change and its implications

- A belief that the change does not make sense for the organisation
- a low tolerance for change

All but the last give credence to the fact that there may be legitimate differences in the way various members of the organisation see the same situation, and what we have come to label 'resistance' can alternatively be seen as a variety of different views on the desirability of change, rather than an undifferentiated blob of 'resistance'. This is often created by imposed change, starting with the manager's articulation of some change objectives, or desired future state, and continuing with a planned set of activities to bring about the change, opposition to which is seen as a challenge to his/her legitimate authority (Nevis also observes that resistance as a concept or as a manifestation has meaning only where there are power differentials among people).

As a result of trying to 'manage change' in this way, we have come to assume that resistance is natural, that everyone is reluctant to change. This is not surprising if we are pushed, sometimes implicitly threatened, or if the process requires that the present reality is denigrated so that those involved in creating and striving to maintain it inevitably feel bad about themselves. Gestalt starts from the proposition that people and organisations are what they are for good reason, and that these good reasons need to be respected and taken into account in any change process. Donald Klein in his book 'Planning of Change', observes that without resistance to change, every new idea would be acted on immediately. There would be no continuity or stability, so we would be caught up and destroyed by chaos. Even our cells would burst because of the absence of resistant membranes to contain their substance. From this perspective, resistance is essential to life as we know it.

While Gestalt assumes that change is natural, and a potential source of energy, paradoxically, change cannot occur without a necessary degree of stability and containment. A Gestalt practitioner will pay equal attention to the routines, procedures, rituals and boundaries which are necessary to provide stability, as to what is needed to release the natural potential for innovation and change within the organisation.

### ***Organisations as Complex Systems***

I want to introduce a final piece of theory because I think it is totally compatible with Gestalt, and also offers some extremely important and useful new thinking about organisations. This is emerging from the study of 'Complexity theory', which is as yet in its infancy, and we are developing it and modifying it as new theoretical insights are combined with our experience of working with organisations. It appeals to me both because it helps me make more sense of my current experiences with organisations, and also because it provides some potentially more rigorous theoretical underpinnings to field theory. Here is a brief overview.

Complex adaptive systems are networks of large numbers of agents, each interacting with others according to their own principles, laws or rules (schemas). In inanimate systems, the agents follow their rules of interaction without ever changing them - these are thus deterministic systems which display no learning. What one agent does affects the others simply because they are interacting with one another. Laboratory experiments and computer simulations have recently made some important discoveries; they have revealed that at low levels of energy/information flow, and when each agent is connected to, interacting with, only a few others, the system displays the dynamics of stability - in the sense that the word is used by sociologists, economists and psychologists we can say that the system displays the dynamics of stability. That is to say, the behaviour patterns produced by the system are regular and predictable, collapsing to one kind of behaviour, a point, or displaying regular cycles, which are quite complicated but are perfectly predictable. Furthermore, any small disturbance in this pattern will be rapidly damped away by the operation of the system. When each agent is interacting with, connected to very large numbers of agents, when energy/information levels in the system are very high, the system displays the dynamics of explosive instability with a tendency to disintegrate when it comes up against a constraint. Here the system amplifies any deviation. The real discovery is that at some critical point in energy/information flow and connectedness between agents, the system displays the dynamics of a phase transition between stability and instability - just before it becomes explosively unstable, it displays a dynamic in which it is both stable and unstable at the same time, in which it is both amplifying and stabilising changes. This dynamic is referred to by Ralph Stacey as 'bounded instability', and I have drawn heavily on his lucid writing for this explanation (Stacey 1997).

Stacey goes on to point out that when we move from inanimate systems to living systems, we can still think of them as complex networks and so the same basic dynamics will apply. However the schemas of agents in living systems anticipate the consequences of certain responses to their immediate environment, and both behaviour and the schemas

themselves are continuously revised in the light of experience. The networks learn therefore in both simple and complex ways. The spontaneous interaction between agents gives rise to aggregate patterns of behaviour which have the capacity to both constrain and enable emergent behaviours, but we can never know which, so that neither can be predicted or explained in terms of the other (Shaw 1997).

Agents, themselves complex adaptive systems, and networks of agents are thus embedded in a perpetually novel, shifting environment which they co-constitute and co-create with other agents and networks of agents (Holland 1992).

To summarise: complex systems are non-linear, dynamic feedback systems, driven by simple feedback laws, capable of generating behaviour so complex that the links between cause and effect, action and outcome, simply disappear in the detail of unfolding behaviour. Feedback can have either an amplifying or a dampening effect, and it is impossible to know which of those two possibilities will occur. 'When a nonlinear feedback system is driven away from stable equilibrium towards the equilibrium of explosive instability, it passes through a phase of bounded instability in which it displays highly complex behaviour. There is what we might think of a border area between stable equilibrium and unstable equilibrium, and behaviour in this area has some important characteristics; while it is unpredictable, it also displays what has been called a hidden pattern. It is in permanent flux, and the implicate order emerges while the system in this phase is inherently self-organising. In this phase the system has the greatest capacity for innovation and regeneration.

These characteristics sound very similar to many of the underlying principles of Gestalt; indeed Heraclitus himself might have asked, "so what's new?" What Heraclitus did not foresee was the impact of the ideas of Newton, Descartes, the neo Darwinians and many others within these modern traditions on the western world's modes of thought, and the way these modes of thought have inevitably infiltrated Gestalt practice, if not its rhetoric. This way of conceiving organisations represents, in Kuhn's (1970) sense of the word, a paradigm shift from the modernist perspective, and as managers come to adopt it, and to learn a new type of behaviour, so they will become liberated from the forms of recurrent 'Stuckness' defined by Watzlawick et al. which I describe at the end of this chapter.

#### An Example:

I was working with some colleagues for a reasonably large engineering company, which had grown by a series of acquisitions and needed to respond to some of its large car maker customers' demands that it become more integrated in its capability to respond. This was expressed in the jargon of the day as a requirement to be a 'global player', a 'virtual company'. In this case the natural boundaries defined by a country or a site which had previously defined the business entity, which people saw as the source of their livelihood, and for which they strove to win orders, often in competition with other members of the same Group, were now seen as an impediment by an emerging group of powerful global customers. These customers threatened to withdraw their business unless this supplier "got its act together".

Our way of working with this organisation was to start by holding a two-day workshop for about 50 managers to begin a dialogue about what becoming 'global' would entail. We had two process principles in mind; one was to create opportunities for people to start talking and addressing problems in groupings that crossed their normal country, site or national boundaries, and the other was to challenge the boundaries of their thinking, to provoke them into experimentation with innovative ways of working. For example, as engineers they tended to tackle problems with 'project groups', with defined terms of reference, clear statement of goals, milestones and methodology. This is fine for many types of problem, but it was very much part of their existing culture, and while it solved problems incrementally, it was not capable of radical innovation. Their view was that the company was facing radical change and our view was that it therefore needed to learn innovative ways of working.

Out of this initial workshop a number of change initiatives formed, and we worked with each one to help them define what was really important in the broad area they had chosen, what could usefully be a project, and how to tackle what could not be turned into a project. The group concerned with customer service, for instance, started by defining four parameters of customer service; They then identified the processes which had the greatest impact on these parameters, what was needed to improve each of these processes and ended up with an impossible list of projects! They then tried to prioritise the list, and then finally came to realise that the final outcome of all this work would be to solve a few problems. The question then became how to have a wider impact, how to engage everyone with the issue of customer service, so that everyone started to think of what they did in terms of its impact on the four parameters. The members of this group began to get themselves invited to operations group meetings, to explain their analysis, point out some of the problem areas in specific terms to specific groups. Some groups accepted the analysis and initiated their own activities to tackle the problems, and other groups were less willing to 'own' their problems, but such is organisational

reality. Nevertheless the members of the customer service group now saw themselves as leaders of a change initiative rather than members of a project team.

One member of our team was less exercised by the need to release innovative potential, and felt the need to pay equal attention to incremental improvement in the engineering, project-based culture. He worked with one group to help them rationalise their production systems, and another to establish an efficient and effective pan-organisation costing system. Organisations need to feel sufficiently secure in their ability to get things done via the formal systems before they can embrace innovation in their business processes.

## Commentary

This example serves to highlight the importance of maintaining both stability and creative instability in organisations, and therefore the need to both honour and challenge 'resistance'. In working on the boundary between stability and instability, we were drawing on the principles of Complexity Theory.

We started with a reasonably large grouping, which we kept working in one large room (we did not have break-out rooms) in order for people to have a better sense of the 'field' of the organisation. Within some broad parameters we invited them to explore their reality, to discover what the issues were, as opposed to giving them a diagnosis and asking them to work on the problems (the approach which was first mooted by the client), and we allowed groups to form around the issues which emerged rather than attempt to assign individuals to issues (self-organisation).

It is interesting to observe that senior managers did not think that the 'right' issues had been identified, but we encouraged them to let this rather messy process of self-organisation unfold rather than have them impose their own change agenda, and many of the groups subsequently redefined the issue they were working on, thereby demonstrating their capacity for creative self-regulation.

Finally we realised how important it was that senior managers did in fact join the change groups but not as the group leader. They were thus not excluded from the process as they would have been in a 'bottom up approach', but were able to influence it by participating in the informal processes of the organisation, as opposed to exerting their influence through their formal leadership role, evoking compliant responses to the exercise of formal power, and inhibiting the system's potential for innovative self-organisation.

## *Stuckness in Organisations*

In most organisations there is much talk of the need for change, and much of the response to the change imperative seems to consist in trying to do things faster, in draconian cost cutting measures, in programmes to improve customer service, in delayering initiatives and their like. One organisation counted up to eighty six current initiatives! Organisations are talking about 'initiative exhaustion' because most of the work is additional to the every day work load.

It would seem however that this frenetic activity is creating exhaustion, without solving 'the problem', and is in many cases making matters worse. Managers are experiencing a new phenomenon which is not susceptible to conventional management techniques, where a fundamental shift in their assumption base is required. It has always been understood that management is about improving things, but the techniques of improvement are not applicable to fundamental change. Organisations tend to tackle fundamental change by applying improvement techniques, so what results is more of the same, including more work and more stress. At a recent workshop with Richard Pascale, who is a proponent of the need for a fundamental shift in what he calls the organisation's 'context - the underlying assumptions and invisible premises on which its decisions and actions are based', one manager eventually burst out: "I don't believe in breakthroughs - fast incremental change is what gets results".

Watzlawick, Weakland and Fish (1974) defined 'Stuckness' as repeated attempts to solve a problem which only succeeded in reinforcing the problem. They described four archetypical patterns of Stuckness, 'trying harder', 'if only' solutions, 'utopian' solutions and 'setting paradoxes'.

These types of stuckness are described in detail in the book, but essentially the stuckness is created by the attempt to solve the problem. For example, if an organisation's revenue is insufficient to generate a required level of profit, it has a problem, but it is not stuck. If repeated attempts to increase the revenue only succeed in raising revenue, reducing margin, increasing effort and consequent fatigue and frustration, and not increasing profit, then it is stuck.

The reason for repetitive failure, if we discount pure incompetence, must lie in the inappropriateness of the underlying mindset or paradigm which informs our attempt to solve the problem. Since the industrial revolution we have tended to view organisations as machines, which can be 'set a direction', monitored, and controlled. Cause and effect links are assumed, and 'rational' behaviour is expected.

The technologies which derive from this objectivist, mechanistic paradigm, such as planning processes, project management techniques, continuous improvement, re-engineering, performance management etc. are well known and



can only work within the current paradigm, and because they derive from it, they are not capable of changing it. They are nevertheless widely applied to bring about fundamental change, that is change which probably requires a radical shift in both the way its members understand, and work in the system, and in its way of relating to its external environment. The most frustrating experience for managers engaged in change initiatives is that despite their best endeavours, they do not experience the real shift they had planned for; plus ça change, plus que c'est la même chose.

It is of course very hard for managers who have struggled to the top of their organisations, to accept that the rules by which they played need to be fundamentally changed. They are usually willing to make substantive changes to the way work is done, often involving what appears to be quite major restructuring, but they are understandably unwilling to question the fundamentals, such as the distribution of power, the inherent hierarchy and related principles of reward; the role and purpose of management, the purpose of the organisation, in effect the deep cultural patterns, routines and assumptions of the organisation which lie at the heart of the current paradigm.

A major part of the job of any Gestalt intervention is to help organisations respectfully understand and work with these patterns of stuckness, to enable them to see and understand better the properties of social systems, and to work more effectively in them.

Bill Critchley  
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